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What Schools are For by John Goodlad

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ARTICLE

What Schools Are For: Stimulating Necessary Dialogue for the Reconstruction of Schools in our Democracy.
A Review of John I. Goodlad's, *What schools are for.* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan International, 2006, Signature Edition).

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John Goodlad is known for his unceasing effort to engage educators, politicians, and the public in dialogue on the purpose of education in a democratic society. From the landmark study *A Place Called School* to his work in developing the National Network for Educational Renewal and the Agenda for Education in a Democracy, Goodlad has for many years represented the reasonable and determined voice of renewal in the midst of shrill cries of reform from all corners. *What Schools Are For*, now in its third edition, is a must-read work addressing Goodlad's efforts to spark dialogue necessary to understanding the roles and purposes of schools in educating a democratic citizenry. This book was first published in 1979 during a time of strident school critiques heavy with questions about necessary school functions and "back to basics" rhetoric. Goodlad enters the fray in a calm yet assertive manner, shifting the focus from criticism and strife to the stimulation of reconstruction-oriented dialogue about our educational system. Coming three years before the infamous report, *A Nation at Risk,* and five years before *A Place Called School,* this timely work was well received by educators seeking to understand the purpose of schools in educating citizens in a democracy and continues to be an essential conceptual work today.

Considering the current educational landscape of high-stakes testing and accountability, *What Schools Are For* has perhaps increased in relevance over the years. As Goodlad notes in the afterword of the current edition, "The school crisis today is not the performance of students on achievement tests. It is the failure of education writ large to develop in our citizens the wisdom necessary to sustain in good health the delicate social and political ecology of the complex, moral community that is the United States of America" (p. 153). Goodlad addresses this crisis by initiating dialogue necessary to understanding what schools are for and how they must be improved to better meet the educative needs of our democratic society.

What Schools Are For considers three central questions: What are schools expected or asked to do? What do schools do? What should schools do? These questions address the goals, functions, and aims of schools. Goodlad raises a number of issues in relation to these questions to spark dialogue necessary to improving our schools. Key to understanding this dialogue is an underlying conceptual question: Do schools function educationally enough of the time to be considered educational institutions, or are they overloaded with other kinds of goals and functions that keep schools from the true aims of schools in a democracy?

Schools are expected to address the education gap. This is not the achievement gap, a current fad of analyzing student outcomes and blaming students and parents for perceived shortcomings, but is a deeper and more vital issue Goodlad defines as "the distance between man's most noble visions of what he might become and present levels of human functioning" (p. 19). This gap functions as a catalyst for educational change and is a fundamental social goal schools are expected to address. Closing the education gap, however, is not entirely up to schools, as schooling is only one source of education. Other social institutions should be expected to assist with society's educational needs. As it is, though, schools are thrown into every perceived social and educational breach, and because of this we find ourselves at a juncture, a point where we must ask whether our system of schooling "has outlived its usefulness as an institution for both social reform and educational advancement" (p. 23). Closing the education gap is a heavy charge. Addressing this goal becomes much more difficult when

schools are overburdened with a number of other goals ill-suited to our system of schooling.

An essential goal of schools, Goodlad asserts, is to provide systematic general education, addressing both the purposes of a democracy and the needs of the individual. Goodlad dismisses the tension in this statement, asserting that in education there must be no duality of purpose: "The making of free individuals will result in the making of a free, democratic state. In this we must have faith or education will be corrupted" (p. 42). Education is a process of individual becoming, and schools are expected to support students through this process. Yet despite this clear goal, there is reluctance to "legitimate in practice what the free self requires for its full cultivation" (p. 66). This reluctance is symptomatic of a fundamental misalignment between the goals of schools and their current functions. What schools are doing does not appear to match what they are asked or expected to do. Without addressing this misalignment, Goodlad asserts, our schools may not be able to get better.

Accountability is a major source of misalignment between school goals and functions. Standardized outcomes for the masses are in direct opposition to the school goal of supporting children through the process of individual becoming. Goodlad notes, "Accountability is a good word, and the concepts accompanying it are not to be taken lightly or turned aside by educators. But the approaches to accountability we have witnessed in recent years, which have assigned responsibility without any of the commensurate authority, are a sham" (p. 37). This sham has ballooned since 1979, now reaching the level of national obsession. Sounding as if written in direct response to the accountability mandates of No Child Left Behind, Goodlad observes: "There is nothing wrong with the idea of being accountable, but the problems and injustices in contemporary approaches to educational accountability stem from the fact that all the richness, shortcomings, successes, and failures of human effort are reduced to a few figures, much as one records profits and losses in a ledger book" (p. 72). Under NCLB this ledger book has grown immense, is now titled Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), and comes with scant rewards and heavy consequences. Goodlad's critique of accountability still rings true.

The factory model of schooling, of which accountability is a part, is another major source of misalignment between school goals and functions. This model, with an emphasis on outputs, diminished expectations, and narrow measures of accountability, is fundamentally incompatible with essential school goals of narrowing the education gap and supporting the process of individual becoming. Schools, unlike factories, do not have the means by which to be accountable for an end product. The factory model, with its replication-oriented reforms and scientifically based notions, does not work. Emphasis is placed on scores and outputs rather than learning and conceptual understanding. The result is a system of schooling that does not meet the goals of education. Like an oracle, Goodlad predicted what is emerging in current educational research: "My guess is that those relatively low-level cognitive processes most easily measured and most emphasized in the current back-to-basics movement will show some improvement in test scores during the coming years. But my further guess is that more complex intellectual processes not easily measured will decline at an even greater rate" (P. 75). Current National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, especially in comparison to state-level tests, are beginning to show this disturbing trend. Qualitative studies present an even bleaker picture. Grades predict grades, scores predict scores, but this is where it ends. Evaluation of education must shift from mass scores to the growth of the individual and be focused on learning and higher-level thinking. Until the factory model of schooling, with its damaging obsession with outputs and accountability, is rejected, schools may not be able to improve.

What schools should do is replace the factory model with an ecological model of education that is concerned "with interactions, relationships, and interdependencies within a defined environment" (p. 90). Key here is the idea of a school as a healthy organism. With a focus on how a school functions as an organism, rather than as a factory with production goals (children are people, not widgets), the emphasis on accountability and sustainability shifts so that external expectations are examined in

context and in relation to individual and group life in classrooms and schools. To begin to enact positive change in terms of this ecological model, the health of schools must be addressed, with the school itself as the unit of change. Instruction plays a key role in this improvement process. Although the inherent limitations of instruction in school are obvious—groups of students herded into cubicles for 13 years—it is nevertheless reasonable to expect teachers to "develop and use a guiding framework of concepts, principles, and methods that appear to influence the learning process positively" (p. 109). Leadership is also crucial to the improvement process of schools. Principals, in particular, must be encouraged to focus their efforts on educational leadership rather than management. The management model must be dismissed as part of the faulty model of school as factory. Instead, the ecological model of the school as healthy organism necessitates a leadership role for the principal.

The shift from a factory model to an ecological model of schools would not require new legislation or tougher standards such as those represented by misguided movements like NCLB. Rather, "With a thoughtfully developed agenda focused on the educational program, collaboration within the profession and between school and community, and a supportive infrastructure, the schools we have will get better. All of the resources are available" (p. 122). One wonders why such a clear and logical idea has, for decades, eluded so many leaders at the state and federal level. With the characteristics of an ecological model in place, schools would have the opportunity to align functions with social and educational goals. Significant improvement would follow, at little or no additional cost to society.

Goodlad addresses the aims of schools, or what schools should be for, by suggesting the need for a balance between schools and other potentially educative institutions. Schools, he proposes, "should take on only those social purposes that can be converted easily and naturally into educational goals and activities" (p. 128). This is not to say that schools should focus exclusively on "the three R's." Indeed, if basic reading, writing, and arithmetic were the only goals, then schools could simply be replaced by technology and a voucher system. Rather, the aim of schools needs to be the education of the individual through exposure to new ways of knowing through a variety of media. The experienced teacher in Goodlad is apparent when he asserts,

> I would argue, then, for teaching just a very few basic concepts through every possible means. Not just the reading and writing, but by dancing, drawing, constructing, touching, thinking, talking, shaping, planning; and not just one of these ways for each separate concept, but all of these ways for each concept. In this way schools not only encourage versatility but, in addition, give the greatest possible assurance that each student will learn because of the variety of learning modes that are brought into play (p. 139).

The purpose of the school is to develop the full potential of the individual, for the sake of both the individual and our democracy. We as educators and members of society must join the dialogue Goodlad strives to initiate in order to consider how to address the misalignment between our ideals and actions. As he asserts, we are all accountable for the condition of our schools, and it is time for us to participate in their reconstruction. In the afterword of the recent edition, Goodlad writes: "Our nation is marked by a characteristic that is both interesting and frightening: We are extraordinarily patient with human folly, sometimes not paying attention until it has brought us to the edge of a precipice. Then we look down and wake up" (p. 153). Surely we as educators have looked down into the precipice of NCLB and have woken up. Now is the time to act to improve our schools, for the education of our children and the health of our democracy. *What Schools Are For* stimulates the dialogue necessary for this act of reconstruction.